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ABSTRACT

In Minnesota, where nearly 18,000 Indochinese have resettled, educational institutions are concerned with providing immigrants with the necessary support to ease the absorption process. But many Indochinese students face complex difficulties and problems that are not being addressed. As the student passes through four distinct periods of adjustment, English language fluency and use often outpaces that of his or her parents. Thus, conflict often occurs between parents' norms and the new society's norms. Other problems faced by the student include physical appearance and language differences, integrating into the "new freedom" of the U.S. educational system, remaking family relationships, and conflicts with his or her English-speaking peer group. It is suggested that public schools might create more ESL programming and counseling and social work services, and that they also need to play a more active and knowledgeable role in the family adjustment process. The gap between parents, young people, and the schools might be diminished if schools got to know families (and vice versa) through home visits, phone calls, school meetings, at-home tutoring services, support groups, and peer tutoring. Teachers and parents should not be overanxious for immediate results. Refugee students are "opportunities" for whom the question "has enough been done?" should always be asked. Finally, better communication between the agencies working with these young immigrants and the schools is still greatly needed. (KH)

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IMMIGRANT FAMILIES: THE CASE OF THE INDOCHINESE REFUGEES AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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by

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INTRODUCTION

The immigration experience and the absorption process effect are affected by a number of extenuating circumstances. This includes the overall attitude of the absorbing community towards immigrants and the motivation on the immigrant's part to emigrate and integrate. In the case of the Indochinese refugees(this include Vietnamese, Laotians, Hmongs, Cambodians, and Indochinese Chinese backgrounds), it is a fact that families came to the United States to escape from the country from which they had previously lived rather than just making a positive choice in terms of wanting to live in the United States. Often, the families have moved where there was a place available. In Minnesota, where nearly 18,000 Indochinese have re-settled, the concern has been directed toward the need for social services which provide immigrants with the necessary supports to ease the transition from their native countries and their adaptation to American life. Lutheran Social Service, Catholic Charities, and the American Refugee Committee have been particularly active in sponsoring Indochinese refugees and remain involved in providing services for this population. Educational institutions as well are concerned about their ability to provide responsive and appropriate services to this group.

The Minneapolis and St. Paul Public Schools serve the greatest number of these Indochinese students and they offer both English As A Second Language(ESL) and bilingual instruction. In the school district where I work and in the surrounding suburban school districts, only ESL is offered to provide language instruction in English. The number we serve is much less than those in the two large districts of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Our secondary school has a population of 2,600 students Grades 7-12 and we serve about 50 ESL students. The elementary schools have a similar number.

ISSUES AND FACTORS INVOLVED

As a counselor in the secondary school, I have observed that many Indochinese students encounter a number of other difficulties and problems that are not addressed. Because of the complexity of the types of problems that are unique to families that move to a new country, the schools should have a sensitive understanding of all the possible factors that influence children and their families.

One of the most important factors for educators to consider is a pattern of adjustment that is characteristic of practically all individuals when they have moved to a new country. There seem to be four distinct periods through which one must pass to regain identity and flourish in a new culture and these include the following:

1. Rote Period - one simply repeats words and phrases and begins programming the brain with the new language,

but it is impossible to produce speech until enough examples have been stored to make associations with one's native language;

2. Silent Period - these mute weeks or months are like being in a tunnel, all alone surrounded by cacophony. At the end of the tunnel of silence is a wall. If one can not get up the courage to crash through it, to stumble and fall and make terrible mistakes, one will never communicate. It is sink or swim and many refugees get stuck here. The trick is to resist feeling nullified by this degrading experience and to come out the other side eager to throw around words and phrases one has stored. It is during this stage when teachers and other support people can be very supportive and patient. Perhaps encourage students to keep a diary of their thoughts in their native language;
3. Reckless Period- the sentences gush out and half the words are upside down or backwards but it does not matter because one is communicating. A message is only a message when it is received. The responses one receives add to the sheer euphoria of finding the key to unlock one's new culture. In the words of one Vietnamese student, she wrote in her journal:

> "For three months, my sister and I sat in class not understanding a word that was being said. It was a terrible feeling. I felt dumb. Then all of a sudden, I could talk in English and the words kept coming. It was exciting."

4. Refining Period - when the refugee student shows flexibility and can shift alternatively between information seeking and tension reduction - a gradual return to more satisfaction.

Then there is the issue of the schools dealing primarily with the language instruction. It has been found that younger children do have a greater capacity for learning the host country's language. Children do tend to speak the new language more than their parents and this has often created an additional conflict for the child between identifying with norms of the parents vs. norms of the new society. There is reason to believe that parent-child communications suffer because of the children being more adept in the new language. In most homes, children usually alternate between speaking the host language with their peers and others outside the home and speaking their native language with their parents. The younger ones ultimately speak English only.

Once the reality of everyday living takes over, other problems evolve and among these are the following:

1. physical appearance and language single them out from the very beginning;
2. pressure of integrating into a school setting - adjusting to a new peer group and the desire to fit in as quickly as possible;

3. differences in educational systems - back home rigid discipline and clearly prescribed student roles and behaviors and in the United States, roles are less defined. Some may not be able to handle the new freedom;
4. remaking relationships within their family structure - these cause intergenerational conflicts - the demands of the home and the demands of the local environment are sometimes incompatible;
5. conflict with their English speaking peer group.

For these refugee students, it would be difficult or impossible for them to return to their original home so that they would not be able to have the choice available if they did not adjust well. It is clear that with the meager knowledge they have about the United States, they are likely to experience much tension and loss of confidence to deal with everyday life, demands, and the fact that they have to learn a new culture with practically no reinforcement. Because it is difficult for both adults and children to foresee any satisfaction of their psychological and physical needs and demands, the usual reaction is withdrawal, anxiety, confusion, and apathy which is often accompanied by feelings of loneliness and isolation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Based on the above information, implications for the public schools would require full understanding of the nature of the problem. My feeling is that more than English As A Second Language programming would be needed to help these refugee students adjust in the new

country and in the new school. There is a great need for counseling and social work services in the sense that the biggest factor of a family's adjustment is actually related to the happiness of both parents. Take note, however, that social service or counseling is a fairly new concept for these refugees and their families. Asian peoples are proud. They are hesitant to use mental health services. Mental health is an interaction of client system, family system, and community system. Sensitivity and knowledge of the community is crucial. The counselor's role is not easy because one has to rely heavily on one's impulses and instincts which are savored by time, knowledge and experience. Expectations are different. One has to capture the nature of the family's dynamics and since the family is a central point, a thorough assessment is necessary. Mobilize the strength of the family and understand the flow of authority and be flexible.

A family's improved adjustment may be enhanced by their readiness to accept set-backs and failure without upset, with the ability to recover one's self and to keep going while not taking themselves so seriously. Even though most children in the schools seem to adjust fairly well, it would be naive to think that total adjustment would be satisfactory since there are so many complex problems for the family to overcome. Schools, therefore, need to take a more active part in the adjustment process and to understand what is happening in the family structure.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The gap between parents, young people and the schools is of growing concern. Parents are held responsible for the behavior of their children, yet society provides very little in the way of support for them as people. Happy parents raise happy children. Communication with parents of these young immigrants is essential in promoting their adaptation and immigration. Parents are not thrust into an environment which demands behavioral changes to the extent young people in school are forced to adapt. They have suffered the effects of wars and transitional living arrangements and are essentially non-Western in their beliefs and attitudes. They strive to preserve their culture while the young have become modernized and westernized in the school setting.

The tension between parents and children emerge from the interaction between what was known or had been in the native culture and what exists in the new, or absorbing culture. Hence, including parents as partners in the process is essential in enduring the adaptation and integration of immigrant youth in this country.

There is no question that language has created a barrier between school, parents, and young people. One suggestion I have is to convey to the parents and children that schools DO CARE about them. Therefore:

1. An effort should be made on getting to know families, making home visits and phone calls even when language is an obstacle;

2. Hold regular meetings with parents to furnish them with information about the school and acquaint them with various curricular subjects. With help from an interpreter, it can be done in the native language.
3. Perhaps a home tutoring service can be set up - the primary focus is to have children work with the tutor in the presence of an adult member of the family so many times a week. This is viewed as a way to positively influence the family and to serve as a role model for parents to take part in their child's education;
4. Support groups especially for those unaccompanied minors who arrive alone. It is important to allow young people to share experiences which are significantly different from those of their peers. Groups run in the native language are essential in promoting communication. A young person who speaks limited English will be less likely to participate in a meaningful way when forced to speak English;
5. Continue the peer tutoring that is going on in the schools. It benefits both the tutor and the one being tutored;
6. Teachers in the regular classrooms should be patient - do not rush to judgement and allow the situation to develop. This is also true with parents and guardians who are

overanxious for results immediately. Keep in mind the different stages that an immigrant goes through;

7. Treat these refugee students as OPPORTUNITIES and concern should just not be whether we have done enough for them as to whether we have done enough with them;
8. Lastly, there is still a great need for better communication between the agencies working with these young immigrants and the schools.

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